

Words *Can* Hurt Me: An analysis of labels used by the Trump administration and Human Right First

Placing labels on concepts, ideas, things and even people allows for the application of a level of understanding that is attached to the label itself. Labels are important as they provide insight on those understandings or views of the entity providing the label. These labels play a powerful role in the rhetoric behind migration. In recent global politics, migration has had a central role in the rhetoric of state and non-state actors. In the case of U.S. politics, the recent Trump administration took a hard stance against migration into the U.S. The administration used words such as “immigrants”, “aliens” (N.B., 2020 B) and “non-citizens” to describe people entering the nation. These words were accompanied by qualifiers and definitions such as “illegal”, “gang members and criminals” (N.B., 2019) “MS-13” (N.B., 2019) and “threat” (N.B., 2020 A) to contextualize and justify policies such as the commonly-called Muslim travel ban and the Remain in Mexico immigration policy (also known as the Migrant Protection Protocols) reducing access to legal channels for crossing the U.S. border and seeking asylum. The Trump administration sought to curtail “mass immigration” (N.B., 2020 A) by placing greater barriers for entry and fixing allocations of green cards and visas to skills and merits (N.B., 2019).

Compare this type of rhetoric to that used by humanitarian and rights organisations, such as Human Rights First, and a difference in the language used emerges. When addressing the Trump administration’s platforms on migration, HRF is more inclined to use words such as “refugees” and “asylum seekers” (Human Rights First, 2021). Additionally, the organisation uses qualifiers that help humanize the people attached to those labels: “boy”, “women”, “parents” (Human Rights First, 2021). In one report, HRF explicitly states that these individuals are “people seeking humanitarian protection” (Human Rights First, 2020). This type of labelling humanizes the people attached to the label and allows for a more comprehensive narrative to be told about the migrants, particularly those seeking refuge. The language appears to be carefully selected to raise awareness and to pull at the heartstrings of their audiences, ideally to advocate for state actors to overturn exploitive policies.

Arendt, as cited by Cole (2017), notes how the label of refugee is tied to “wider ideas on the state, citizenship and ‘the notions of “self” and “other” which prevail at the time”’. The Trump administration sought to “Keep America First” in its policies by prioritizing current American citizens over non-citizens. The suppressive language tended to increase during times of national instability such as after mass shooting events demonstrating the “host of broader social, political and societal issues” (Cole, 2017) tied to labels. Many nationalist states’ administrations are keen to avoid the use of the word ‘refugee’ or ‘asylum seeker’ in order to “restrict individual’s access to the ‘privileged’ status of refugeehood” which, once invoked, obligates countries to provide rights and protections (Cole, 2017) to those seeking it. On the flip side, activist organisation such as HRF use labels to push their agenda in advocating for the care and protection of those facing crises and harm. No party is innocent in its selective use of labels to push particular agendas.

References

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